J Klopfer email

Date: 29 May 2000 13:45:17 -0400
Sender: Matt Cartmill <matt_cartmill@baa.mc.duke.edu>
From: Matt Cartmill <matt_cartmill@baa.mc.duke.edu>
Subject: Re: J Buettner-Janusch
To: <lederberg@rockvax.rockefeller.edu>

Here's the unedited version, in ASCII. Let me know what you make of it. --Matt C.

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:f /j/X/buettner-janusch

private communication; no permission to cite

On July 2, 1992, Dr. John Buettner-Janusch died of pneumonia at a prison hospital in Springfield, Missouri, where he was serving a 20-year sentence for sending poisoned candy to a Federal judge in 1987. His death at the age of 67 brought to a close one of the strangest and most tragic careers in the history of anthropology.

B-J, as he was known to his friends and colleagues, was born in Chicago in 1924 and grew up in rural Wisconsin. He claimed to have been interned as a conscientious objector during World War II. When the war ended, he entered the University of Chicago, where he met and married his wife Vina and earned a series of degrees culminating in a 1953 M.A. in anthropology. After spending two years as an instructor at the University of Utah, he undertook doctoral studies at the University of Michigan. His 1957 dissertation, written under James Spuhler's supervision, dealt with the genetics and population biology of the human ABO blood- group system.

In 1958, B-J joined the anthropology faculty at Yale, where his research interests soon shifted from _Homo sapiens_ to the long-neglected prosimian primates. Over the course of the next four years, he headed collecting trips to Africa and Madagascar, bringing back freezers full of human and prosimian blood samples and cages full of living lemurs, lorises, and galagos that formed the nucleus of breeding colonies in his laboratory.

He began to publish a stream of exciting and innovative papers on the serology, genetics, behavior, and systematics of the lower primates. His unique perspective on the study of primate evolution, coupled with his expertise in population biology and genetics, made him a rising star of the "new physical anthropology" in the early 1960s.

B-J's lucid, breezy, and authoritative prose style helped attract attention to his work and ideas, and his 1966 book _Origins of Man_ was for many years widely acclaimed as the leading textbook of biological anthropology.

B-J rode the cultural and political waves of the late 1960s with style and skill. Denied tenure at Yale, he moved his lab and his lemurs in 1965 to Duke University, which was newly committed to becoming a major biomedical research institution. He contributed to that goal in

many ways. The Primate Facility that his grants built to house his animal colonies developed into the Duke Primate Center. His research, resources, and reputation attracted a growing community of bright students and young colleagues. Duke soon became a leading center for the study of primate biology and human evolution, and B-J himself became a colorful celebrity. He cherished this role and played it to the hilt. He was a spectacular figure at anthropology meetings, dressing up in expensive suits and psychedelic ties, hosting fabulous parties, and voicing loud, witty opinions on every possible topic. From 1971 to 1977, he served on many important scientific panels and committees, including the Executive Committee of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. Appointed as Editor of the Yearbook of Physical Anthropology in 1971, he transformed that publication from a dusty anthology of reprints into an important vehicle for original review articles.

As B-J's power and influence reached a peak in the early 1970s, his reputation as a researcher began to decline. The problems and techniques that he knew how to handle were no longer at the cutting edge of his discipline, and he was repelled and baffled by new trends in systematics, paleoanthropology, and the study of molecular evolution. Frustrated by falling external grant support and a Duke administration that he saw as unsympathetic, he left Duke in 1973 to head the Department of Anthropology at New York University.

B-J was a controversial figure at NYU from the outset, and the department rapidly became polarized into friends and enemies of the new chairman. His friends saw him as a flamboyant and abrasive but principled champion of academic excellence. His enemies saw him as a sort of petty Caligula: perverse, arbitrary, egomaniacal, and vindictive. Vina, who had run B-J's laboratory and regulated many aspects of his life at Duke, died abruptly in 1977 of liver cancer. Her death plunged him into a strange, dark depression from which he never really emerged. B-J began to take his cues from intimate friends and confidants among the department's students and secretaries, and his behavior became increasingly bizarre.

In February, 1979, an NYU student told his advisor Clifford Jolly that suspicious things were going on in B-J's lab. Determined to get to the bottom of all this, Jolly went secretly into the lab at night to photograph notebooks and sample flasks of chemicals. Some of the samples proved to contain the depressant methaqualone, better known on the illegal drug market as Quaalude. Jolly presented his findings to the NYU administration and received permission to lead Federal drug agents in a midnight raid on the laboratory. The raid netted additional quantities of methaqualone and a chemical precursor of LSD. Although B-J protested that he had intended to use these substances in a pilot study of the effects of drugs on lemurs, he was tried and convicted in 1980 on charges of conspiring to make and sell illegal drugs.

After serving three years of a five-year sentence at a minimum-security Federal prison in Florida, B-J moved into a halfway house for paroled drug offenders in Manhattan and started an unsuccessful search for some sort of academic job. Finding that none of his contacts meant anything any more and that his reputation lay in ruins, he went back to his childhood home in Eagle River and brooded. Shortly before Valentine's Day, 1987, he mailed anonymous gift boxes of expensive chocolates from a New York post office to several recipients. The chocolates were laced with a variety of potentially deadly poisons, including atropine and pilocarpine hydrochloride. One box was sent to Federal judge Charles Brieant, who had presided over B-J's drug trial. Brieant's wife, who ate four of the chocolates, survived after

being rushed to a hospital in critical condition. Identified as the poisoner by a fingerprint on the box, B-J pleaded guilty to sending dangerous substances through the mail with intent to cause grave bodily harm. He received a maximal sentence of 20 years in prison.

Those of us who remained friends of B-J's to the end found his last letters from prison calm, reasonable, and lucid, with none of the suppressed (and, in hindsight, homicidal) rage that pervaded his correspondence in the 1980s. Even locked in a maximum-security prison cell, he continued to follow new scientific and intellectual trends and to read and contribute to the literature of physical anthropology, in which he was responsible for so many important advances. We hope that his best work and his many significant achievements will in the judgment of history come to outweigh the excesses and tragedy that overwhelmed him at the end of his career.

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